

# Evangelical Review of Theology

EDITOR: DAVID PARKER

Volume 28 · Number 2 · April 2004

Articles and book reviews reflecting global evangelical  
theology for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by



**PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS**



for  
WORLD EVANGELICAL  
ALLIANCE  
Theological Commission

# The Nature of the Good

James Danaher

**KEYWORDS:** *Modern, post-modern, culture, sacrifice, creation, pleasure, transformation*

CHRISTIANS, PERHAPS more than the rest of the contemporary world, naively suppose that the basic concepts they possess are somehow God-given and provide a sufficient understanding of the reality into which God has placed them. They resist the contemporary insight that our concepts are the product of our culture and language community. They seem to believe that if they were to embrace such a view it would undermine their faith. This is surprising. Christians more than anyone should embrace such a truth since the Scripture tells us that God's thoughts are not our thoughts (Isa. 55:8), and that we need to be 'transformed by the renewing of (our) mind' (Rom. 12:2).

Even if we believe that we have been equipped with some kind of God-given hardware that causes us to form some concepts that do correctly reflect the reality into which God had placed us, it seems obvious that we have also been

given liberty concerning most concepts. Therefore, our concepts may be altered over time and from culture to culture until their meaning becomes something very different from the understanding God originally tried to impart to us.

Nowhere is this more true than with our idea of the good. This is not to deny that there may be some universal sentiments which nearly everyone recognizes as praiseworthy and others which are nearly universally seen as despicable. But in terms of those things that we see as good and which we pursue in the hope of giving purpose and meaning to our lives, our ideas certainly do vary enormously over time and from culture to culture. Even from one individual to the next, we find great variation between what we conceive to be good.

The problem is further complicated by the fact that our idea of what is good has an enormous effect upon the rest of our understanding. The structuralism and post-structuralism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have made us aware of the fact that words have their meaning, not

---

*James P. Danaher, Ph.D., M. Phil. (City University, New York) is Head of the Department of Philosophy, Nyack College, NY and Chair of the Department of Arts and Sciences, Berkeley College, White Plains, NY. He has published articles in many philosophical and theological journals, including 'Forgiveness: Human and Divine' (Lexington Theological Quarterly, Summer 2000), 'The Dynamics of Faith: from Hope to Knowledge' (The Asbury Theological Journal, Fall 2000), 'The place of Berkeley's ideas' (Philosophical Enquiry Summer 2000), 'Concepts and our understanding of them' (Ashland Theological Journal, 1999). He is the author of Postmodern Christianity and the Reconstruction of the Christian Mind. (Academica Books, 2001)*

because of their reference to things but because of their reference to concepts, and these concepts do not simply have atomic meanings but take their meaning from their relationship to other concepts. The consequence of this is that my understanding of any concept is affected by my understanding of a host of other concepts. Of all our concepts perhaps none affects our other concepts as much as our ideas of what is good.

Plato claimed that we all want what is good, or at least what we believe is good. Few of us, however, truly have excellent lives, simply because we do not have an adequate idea of what is truly good. This is as true for Christians as for anyone else. Indeed, although Christians may make the pretence to the good life, it should be obvious to them that their idea of the good life and God's idea of the same is very different. If you have trouble believing this, consider the fact that an all wise God, who we believe does have a perfect knowledge of the good, chose for his son a life that none of us would ever willingly choose for ourselves or our children. Obviously, if God is good and only does good, he has a very different idea of the good from what we do.

The college I teach at was originally a missionary college. The first graduating class in the 19th century numbered five missionaries who went off to the mission field and all died. The college never puts that fact in the catalogue—not a good way to recruit students. Why? Because our idea of what would be good for our lives is very different from what God thinks is good. For his own son, God chose a short and difficult life that led to a painful death. God chose this for his son because he

knew what was ultimately good in a way that we do not. We choose the lives we do because of our own immediate pleasure and ill-conceived idea of what is good. We have the misspent lives we do because we cannot get over our ill-conceived idea of the good and confess to God that we do not know what is good, and need his wisdom and direction in this regard.

So much of what we call Christianity is either about me trying to become good in order that God will love me, or about me having God bless me in order that my life will be good so I can love it. If my life does not conform to my idea of what is good I hate my life. We love only that which we think is good. We think we don't have the fullness of the Christian life because we're not completely healed or in a constant state of euphoria. We even sometimes doubt our faith, and that can't be good.

Based upon our idea of what is good, we believe that we somehow are missing the fullness of the Christian life, so we change churches or try to find someone who promises us what we believe will be more than what we presently have. We want a new formula for prayer, worship, or whatever will increase the missing blessings in our lives. But do we know what the true blessings from God are? Or is our idea of a blessing based on our very inadequate and all-too-human idea of what is good. Both Job and his comforters interpreted the circumstances of Job's life based upon their own very inadequate idea of what is good.

True, we, like God, love what is good but our idea of what is good is very different from his idea of what is good. What God loves and sees as good is his creation. In the first chapter of

Genesis, God repeatedly says of his creation that 'it was good' (Gen. 1:4,10,12,18,21,25). But of all of God's creation, the greatest good and what he loves above all else is to create the image of his son in human flesh. Since what God loves and has a passion for is creation—especially that creation which produces the image of his son—God's idea of what is good or evil is very different from ours.

We deem something good if it satisfies our desire for pleasure or aids us in realizing some end we set for ourselves. The same is true of God, but since the end he has set for himself, and what pleases him above all else, is to reproduce the image of his son in sinful flesh, what God sees as good within human beings is their willingness to allow God to accomplish that purpose. By contrast, what is not good in human beings is their resistance to that purpose.

We see this quite clearly in the Gospels. Jesus seems not to like the people who are 'good people' but instead likes sinners or people who by our standards are not 'good people'. Jesus obviously has a different standard. Indeed, it is not a human standard at all but a divine standard which sees evil as resistance to God's purposes, and good as cooperation with those purposes.

Since God's purpose is to bring radical transformation about in our lives, those people who resist that transformation are not good in God's sight. Such people are good in their own sight, however, and it is for that very reason that they resist the transformation God wants to bring about within them. By thinking they are good, such people see no reason for radical trans-

formation. By contrast, sinners often do see the need for radical transformation. Their desperate situation often produces the kind of willingness and surrender God is looking for in order to accomplish his purpose.

The insight which Jesus has and we generally lack is that good people or people who by human standards are good have no pressing need to change and allow God to continue his creation within them. The Pharisees of Jesus' day were what we would call good people. They probably kept the law better than any Jews ever had. But with that goodness came a pride and contentment which closed them to the further creation God wished to bring about within them. Their goodness brought an end to God's creative work in their lives.

In order for God to continue his creation within us, we can never lose sight of our desperate need to be transformed. We need to live in a constant state of repentance in order to be open to God's grace and the kind of transformation he wants to bring about within us. In order to live in such a state of repentance, we need to continually see our shadow or dark side—our need for continual grace and mercy because of the sin in our lives.

Of course, like our idea of the good, our idea of sin and evil is also all-too-human as well. What God sees as sin is separation from his purpose for our lives. That purpose is that his creation would continue in our lives and we would be made into the image of his son. Our separation from that purpose is the sin that keeps us from the abundant good God has for us, and it is that sin from which comes all manner of evil. We, however, for the most part, do

not see sin and evil in that way. We imagine that our sins are only those evils that our culture tells us are not good, but our real sin is our resistance to the great transformation God wants to bring about within us. This is the deeper sin for which we need to repent. Our sin is that we want so much less than what God has for us and we insist that our pitiful idea of what is good for us is better than what God has for us.

We need to surrender our idea of goodness and take on God's idea. If we fail to do so, heaven will not be very heavenly. The Medieval philosopher, John Scotus Erigena made the rather outlandish claim that everyone went to heaven, but many did not like it. His point was that unless we are changed and made like God, especially in regard to our idea of the good, to be eternally in God's presence will be more of a hell than a heaven.

#### NEW FROM PATERNOSTER

### **Elders in Every City: The Role and Origin of the Ordained Ministry**

Roger Beckwith

Addressing the changing role of the ordained ministry, Roger Beckwith looks both within and without the church walls in this journey of exploration. Whilst the clergy's traditional roles in education, counselling, social welfare and marriage guidance have been taken over by teachers, doctors, psychiatrists and social workers, inside, the ordained ministry is also under attack. With the campaign for the ministry of the laity and the prevalence of the Charismatic Movement, the claiming of exclusive rights for the clergy has become much more problematic. Do the clergy have any distinctive role at all? How did the belief arise that they do and can this be grounded in Scripture?

**Roger Beckwith** has taught liturgy at Tyndale Hall, Bristol, and Wycliffe Hall, Oxford. He is a vice-President of the Church Society and the Prayer Book Society.

*ISBN: 1-84227-230-6 / 197x130mm / 128pp / £6.99*



**PO Box 300, Carlisle, Cumbria CA3 0QS, UK**